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**“Naomi Fisher: We Won’t Play Nature to Your Culture”**  
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When Kemper Museum curator Elizabeth Dunbar first asked me to speak about Naomi Fisher in the context of contemporary feminist art, I relished the appropriate irony of the exhibition’s title. For nothing in Fisher’s work—from the lush tropical landscapes to the figures and narratives within them—is “clear cut.” The same might be said of our current moment in feminist art history. In her contribution to the nine views on contemporary art and feminism published in the October 2003 issue of *Artforum*, pioneering feminist art historian Linda Nochlin spoke to this fact when she wrote: “Feminist politics today is far more multivalent and self-aware; the battle lines are less clearly drawn. The binaries—oppressor/victim, good woman/bad man, pure/impure, beautiful/ugly, active/passive—are not the point of feminist art anymore. Ambiguity, androgyny, and self-consciousness, both formal and psychic, are de rigueur.”<sup>1</sup> In art historian Peggy Phelan’s own contribution to this *Artforum* dialogue, she celebrated what she addressed as the resulting ambivalence of young feminist artists like Fisher, as well as situated this sensibility in the larger continuum of cultural history by connecting this ambivalence—as she puts it, “in the fullest sense of that term”—to the increasingly self-critical, multicultural, and relativist postmodern world in which our current, third wave of feminism emerged.<sup>2</sup>

Before launching headlong into a discussion of contemporary feminism, however, perhaps a brief description of its history and terminology is in order. The wave metaphor for feminism’s evolution has been frequently applied to Western women’s history for its

ability to simultaneously define surges in organized women's movement around specific issues and experiences, even as the term suggests the presence of differing voices, debates, and even generations within them. The first wave of feminism is by far the most nebulous, in large part because for nearly 150 years its myriad participants were almost uniformly involved in the one battle that tended to connect them: obtaining the vote in an increasingly democratic Western world. As such, feminism's first wave encompasses individuals and movements as separated by time and approach as Mary Wollstonecraft—whose 1792 book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was published in the wake of the American and French revolutions—and Simone de Beauvoir—whose groundbreaking 1949 book *The Second Sex* was begun shortly after French women first gained the vote in 1945.

After a marked ebb in feminist activity in the post-World War II era—a backlash against women's rolling gains during both World Wars as well as the world-upside-down that they threatened to many—in the 1960s a resurgence was born of women's participation in the period's labor, civil rights, and anti-war movements. Popularly referred to, then as now, as the “women's liberation movement,” feminism's second wave used strategies of the progressive movements from which its leaders sprung to initiate and pass equal-rights legislation, as well as to produce feminist memoirs, theory, and collectives that raised consciousness concerning more insidious examples of sexism ingrained and normalized in everyday life. While this era is often discussed as not just popularizing but institutionalizing feminism—both as an “institution” with certain common goals and practices, and *within* institutions ranging from national governments to organized religion—the fact is that the second wave was far more diverse and

contentious than is (or was) generally acknowledged, leading to visible fissures from the start of this era's feminist resurgence. Feminists of color and working-class women called attention to the upper-class Eurocentrism of second wave leaders, straight and lesbian feminists debated the "proper" sexual positioning of the movement's members, and sex-radical and anti-censorship feminists declared their right to sexual self-expression in the midst of anti-pornography feminist activism.

This expanding discourse—and the heated debates that it inspired—resulted not only in a diverse but an increasingly individualistic feminism that, as the evolving movement both shaped and responded to postmodern theory, would by the 1980s give way to what many have begun to both recognize and theorize as a third wave of the movement. As reflected in the feminist practices of Generations X and Y—who, for better or for worse, are generally the most reported-upon and self-identifying members of our contemporary third wave—our present era is currently defined less by a single-minded focus on organization and activism than on the critical study of identity-formation and representation, leading to a feminist politics expressed more subtly than the strident expressions of previous generations.

But, it's important to remember that what is unique about contemporary feminist thought is not its diversity, but rather its recognition and embrace of the diverse history of feminism itself. Indeed, in *Artforum's* recent feminist feature, when Nochlin recounted her experiences in the second wave she reminds readers: "Although all of us were for justice, equity, and a fair shake for women artists, critics, and academics, our views were extremely varied, and we were often at odds with one another."<sup>3</sup> Nochlin laments that many feminist artists and historians have since attempted to pin down a unified

trajectory for the second-wave as if this diverse generation were so many butterflies in a case; but both she and Phelan seem convinced and pleased that the willful desire to see and practice feminism in the myriad forms that have emerged in young women's art has carried on as much as it has critiqued the dialogue of their predecessors. Indeed, not only did the rolling developments of the now centuries-old women's movement evolve to where ambivalence is perhaps its inevitable fate, as Phelan compellingly points out: "In these days of hideous fundamentalism, the capacity to acknowledge ambivalence is [itself] revolutionary."<sup>4</sup>

Naomi Fisher's work exemplifies this passionate ambivalence as one finds it expressed among emerging feminist artists today. As Elizabeth Dunbar notes in the exhibition essay, "along with flowering locks, come-hither expressions, and beguiling poses," Fisher's women "brandish knives and swords, a juxtaposition that arouses and violates visions of women as mother, lover, and comforter."<sup>5</sup> And, I would add, these contradictions are not just disruptive but productive. I find it telling that when writing about her own work, Fisher makes much of the fact that she was born the same year that pioneering theorist Helene Cixous wrote her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa"—an ambivalent act in itself that reminds us her generation's simultaneous proximity and distance from such second-wave theory. In this essay, Cixous famously wrote: "Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their own bodies. Women must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. [...] Write your self. Your body must be heard."<sup>6</sup> Fisher argues that Cixous' call for women

to write their own experience is still necessary today because it remains “impossible to pretend that the world is no longer hostile towards women.” She continues:

I want to make sense of this world, but I understand that there is no way to know what the unique situations and experiences of all people are unless their stories are actively sought after and honestly expressed. Thus I feel that the most important thing that I can do with my work is to visually synthesize my own relationship with the world. I am telling my story as a young woman who doubts that I can ever have a tangible relationship with anything that is considered natural, but who will keep trying, regardless of its seeming impossibility.<sup>7</sup>

This effort seems particularly clear in Fisher’s photographs, and the powerful, mixed messages to be found there. [SLIDES] On the one hand, the artist refers to their sprawling, overgrown landscapes as “quarantined simulations of a vanished nature,”<sup>8</sup> and in them one finds female subjects whose over-the-top fashion sense—whether haute-couture or low-couture—mark them similarly as consciously-constructed approximations of a vanished, unreal *femininity*. On the other hand, Fisher’s juxtapositions (in works like these two, untitled photographs of 2000) are as likely to conjure laughter as longing—they are as much a slapstick effort to romance “Mother Nature” as a disturbing failure of the same—which the artist recognizes when she identifies such works as acknowledging “the impossibility of these constructs to ever merge, but find[ing] solace in pretending that they can.”<sup>9</sup> (And which I cannot help but think of against [SLIDES] the work of historical male counterparts like Buster Keaton, who similarly managed to simultaneously mock and master the representation of

masculinity in its *own* stereotypically-defining realm of technology.) [SLIDES] While Fisher recognizes the inadequacy of conventional gendered symbols and narratives to effectively represent humanity's complex experiences and vast potential, she also recognizes the *appeal* of this same symbolism—a tendency her work shares with that as different [SLIDES] as the pin-up paintings of Lisa Yuskavage and the conceptual cheerleading of Kansas City's own Rah!Booty. All these young women artists approach conventional markers of femininity with a simultaneous dose of criticism and affection that seems to have emerged as a defining trait of the third wave—its typically postmodern refusal to accept either/or, and reservation of the right to claim both/and.

To feminists used to identifying colleagues by their strident and unyielding politics, such statements surely seem maddeningly open and perversely personal. But, to paraphrase art historian Rosalind Krauss' feminist defense of the famously ambivalent Cindy Sherman, should one take the time to "look under the hood" of young women's artwork today, one finds a great deal more substance than the flashy body work might suggest. [SLIDES] Indeed, Sherman's own emergence at the fuzzy origins of the third wave may be a good place to start a discussion Fisher's relationship to late feminist history. Cindy Sherman's self-portraiture similarly confiscates the symbolic, stereotypical constructions of women that art and popular culture often promote. In her career-making series of untitled "Film Stills," begun in the late 1970s, Sherman dresses and poses herself in the different guises of generic characters from cinema history—the femme fatale, the housewife, the trembling horror-film heroine, the steno-pool temp. By placing herself in the role of each and every one of these stereotypical characters, Sherman not only addresses and denies the masculine desire to fix the woman in a stable and

stabilizing identity, she does so by confiscating, manipulating, and transforming the very stereotypical visual language that has fixed women in such a limited repertoire of roles.

Yet, in addition to the sense of resistance, in the excessive narcissism of her highly controlled self-portraiture there is an undeniable sense of *pleasure* that the characters seem to take in their own image—as, one senses, Sherman feels in her using these characters to shed any inhibitions and play with her own sexual identity—regardless of the success with which they may or may not live up to the stereotypical ideals they mimic. In this way, Sherman was certainly a woman of her time: growing up in the 1960s, at precisely the moment that feminism's second wave exploded on the cultural scene, she sought to capture the rapid, radical changes in sexual ideals that women her age had grown up with, from postwar prudishness to the sexual revolution. But her choice to explore the stereotypes that many of her contemporaries hoped to banish to history's dustbin was unique, and proved prophetic. Of this choice, Sherman has said,

[As a child] I had these role models—women in films—and you would wear pointed bras and girdles and sleep with curlers in your hair. Then in college everything had to be natural—no makeup, no bras, no hair dyeing. So I had a love-hate relationship to the makeup and all the accoutrements of beauty because you were not supposed to like them. But I still like it and get pleasure from it.<sup>10</sup>

By acting simultaneously as loving admirer (of the classic roles that inspired her) and as critical actor/director (who reinvents the roles), Sherman suggested the possibility of both for women—she is *both* spectacle and subject in her staged scenarios. In this

way, she was one of the earliest feminist artists to discourage viewers from buying wholesale into the mythology that such images represented to *either* the culture industry or its feminist critics. In other words, Sherman's early work was rare for the nuanced, ambivalent way with which it approached the possibility of a feminist art simultaneously derived from and critical of popular culture, and paved the way for a subsequent generation of artists to explore and expand upon this position.

[SLIDES] Sherman's subtlety is thrown into high relief next to the strident appropriations of her contemporary, Barbara Kruger. Kruger, a former photo editor for Conde Nast women's magazines, is best-known for works that appropriate imagery and layout styles from the world of fashion and advertising, overlaid by passages meant to subvert the allegorical meanings such imagery was originally created to express. In this way, Kruger's 1983 work *We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture* uses appropriated imagery against itself in a similar manner as Sherman's does. Here, Kruger appropriates a closely-cropped image, likely from a vintage 1950s fashion layout or advertising campaign, which represents a female model's face against a backdrop of grassy ground, tiny leaves covering each of her eyes. The glamorous, eerily familiar image is then sandwiched between the title's passage, "We won't play nature/ to your culture," as a jolting reminder of the message this kind of popular imagery of women communicates about their role in society. Taken as an example of the broader allegorical function of Kruger's similar appropriations, the piece underscores the extent to which her work directly refutes the concept of men as producers of culture and women as products of nature. A righteous refutation, to be sure—but the work does not offer women a way to associate with either the image or the "nature" it allegedly



represents without a sense of betrayal. In the same way that Kruger's language establishes a righteous and victimized "us" against an oppressive "them," so such works suggest you are either with "us"—ie., feminists who transcend such traditional images by striving to embody the opposite—or you are with "them"—ie. The Man who keeps you down. Kruger not only suggests that feminists "won't play nature," they simply will not—cannot—*play*.

[SLIDES] But it is in *precisely* the playground of nature that Naomi Fisher romps, referencing all the violence, pleasures, and disappointments that she finds there. I find her recent, pirate-themed images of 2003 and 2004 particularly compelling for this reason. Claiming the work of punk-feminist author Kathy Acker as an influence, Fisher conjures the specter of the pirate as Acker does in her notorious 1996 novel *Pussy: King of the Pirates*—as a symbol of power, freedom, androgyny, adventure, and danger. And whereas in images like this one, viewers are tempted to see the long-locked, curvaceous young woman at one with the ocean raging as nature, in fact she is just as easily read as raging *at* nature—lending an ambivalence to the image that I would argue more truthfully approximates most women's tortured, complex relationship to not only nature, but by extension their sex, their sexuality, and their gender identity than the didactic imagery of Kruger. If you will allow me the bad pun, the image brings to mind the words of artist and critic Collier Schorr, who recently stated of her own work: "With every piece I make, I am aware that my feminism may be difficult to detect [...] I find myself swimming in the fantasy of the crisis."<sup>11</sup>

[SLIDES] And the acknowledgement of this "crisis," this embrace of contradiction marks both Fisher's imagery and her feminism. In perhaps the most striking image of

the Kemper Museum's *Clear Cut* exhibition, entitled *You know that it's real if you feel that it's real*, Fisher reveals and revels in this crisis. Again posed, sword-in-hand, amidst the sprawling expanse of Miami's tropical flora, the artist undercuts this seeming personification of nature triumphant in several ways. First is the ghetto-fabulous, faux-military camouflage lingerie our heroine wears—which, while certainly a fetching choice for the modern warrior-princess, hardly appears either practical or protective for the presumed battle at hand. Similarly, though the figure's triumphant stance before the ominously-encroaching plant life and blood-red sky seems to mark her as their dark mistress, the power lines that puncture the horizon, and the tilt of the bungalow roof peeking out from the flora in the middle ground expose the fakery, even the comedy of the image: this is no Amazon queen before her primordial island, but a feisty young woman playing one in her overgrown Florida backyard. But as the title of the piece suggests, while they fantasy cannot be "real," the persistent desire to dream this reality, to will this sense of freedom and power into existence, if only for a moment, may itself be sufficient in a world where not just women, but humanity at large feels so frequently disempowered, diminished, and disconnected. And while one may want to chastise Fisher for the anger or the violence of this fantasy, I believe that she deserves credit for incorporating the subtle details that she does, which pull the rug out from under it.

As daring, even aggressive as Fisher's work is, what I appreciate about its power is that it is not absolute. By undercutting its provocative intermingling of sex and violence with the complexity, humor, and contradiction that she does, Fisher's work does what the best provocations do: opens up a space for dialogue in its wake. I would argue that this ambivalence is a luxury of feminism's progress fought for third wave

feminists like Fisher and myself by our second-wave predecessors: resulting in a confident and complicated recognition of not only the ways in which women relate to their sexual selves—as well as their classed, raced, and even gendered selves—but one another other, men, and the world, instigating a dialogue that compels us to discuss and hash out these myriad relationships. Considering the inspiration that the artist finds in Helene Cixous, perhaps it is appropriate to end my brief discussion of Fisher's photographs (and instigate a dialogue of our own) with Cixous' words—for in Fisher's "playing nature," like Cixous she recognizes the unfortunate fact that society still wants to rivet women "between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss." But the work also challenges us to discover that—contrary to the myths upon which the battle-lines between the sexes have been drawn—"you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," *Artforum* 42, no.2 (October 2003), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Phelan, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," 149.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," 141.

<sup>4</sup> Phelan, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," 149.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Dunbar, "Naomi Fisher: Clear Cut" (exhibition essay) (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, edited by Hillary Robinson (London: Blackwell, 2001): 627, 630. Originally published in *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-893.

<sup>7</sup> Naomi Fisher, artist's statement from Caribbean Contemporary Arts (CCA), Big River Workshops. Online: <<http://www.cca7.org/workshopspages/bigriver.html>>

<sup>8</sup> Naomi Fisher, artist's statement from Caribbean Contemporary Arts (CCA).

<sup>9</sup> Naomi Fisher, artist's statement from Caribbean Contemporary Arts (CCA).

<sup>10</sup> Maria Lind, "Retracing the Steps of Cindy Sherman: Retaining the Element of Chance" (1995) (From artist's files at Metro Pictures.)

<sup>11</sup> Collier Schorr, , "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," 146.

<sup>12</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 630, 632.